

USDA SEEKS COMMENTS ON WETLANDS RESERVE PROGRAM

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WASHINGTON, Jan. 15, 2009—The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is seeking public comments on the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP). The 2008 Farm Bill reauthorized and amended the program, and an interim final rule was published in today's Federal Register.

"WRP helps landowners restore their land to its natural wetland condition with an emphasis on priority wildlife habitat and environmental benefits," said NRCS Chief Arlen Lancaster. "I invite anyone who is interested in wetlands conservation to review this interim final rule and to provide us written comments."

WRP, administered by USDA's NRCS, provides technical and financial assistance to eligible landowners to address wetland, wildlife habitat, soil, water, and related natural resource concerns on private agricultural land. The program provides landowners financial incentives to protect, restore, and enhance wetlands on their property. This voluntary program strives to achieve the greatest wetland functions and values and optimize wildlife habitat on every enrolled acre. To date more than 2 million acres have been enrolled in the program.

USDA encourages written comments on the interim final rule from individuals as well as governmental agencies and nongovernmental organizations during the 60 day comment period. The interim final rule can be viewed at: <http://www.gpoaccess.gov/fr/>. The period for public comments will close March 16, 2009.

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"WRP has been a popular program with landowners because it helps them reach their own personal land use goals and helps provide entire communities with the benefits that wetlands offer," said Lancaster. "Wetlands are among the most productive ecosystems in the world. They provide countless economic and environmental benefits to local communities."

Wetlands are biologically diverse and dynamic ecosystems that support diverse populations of wildlife, plants, and fish. They supply life-sustaining habitat for hundreds of species, including many of the Nation's endangered and threatened species. They provide a protective buffer for our towns and cities against floods and storm surges. They also buffer coastal areas from erosion. Wetlands also help protect water quality by filtering out pollutants and offer aesthetic and recreational opportunities.

Since its inception in 1935, NRCS' conservation delivery system continues a unique partnership, delivering conservation that respects local needs, while accommodating state and national interests. It is an efficient, interdependent, locally-based conservation support system. For more information on NRCS, WRP, and conservation programs available in your community, stop by your local USDA service center, or visit NRCS online at www.nrcs.usda.gov or <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/wrp/>.